

# Pañcakkhandha as the basic concept of Human Existence

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Pañcakkhandha, according to Buddhism, is the psycho-physical reality of human existence. This totality of the human being, as seen from outside, is also referred to as *nāma-rupa*. The Suttanipata obviously reckons with this totality of man when it uses the word *nāma-rūpa* in the following.

*Sabbaso nāma-rūpasmim̃ yassa natthi mamāyitam̃  
Asatā ca na socatī sa ve loke na jiyyatī.*

Sn. v. 950

Whosoever has no **notion of I and mine** [*mamāyitam̃*]  
with regard to his own **visibly identified self** [*nāmarūpasmim̃*]  
He grieves not in terms of what really exists not [*asatā*].  
He indeed shall never suffer defeat in the world.

Translated by the author.

It is to be appreciated that this study is made from the point of view of a Buddhist, in an attempt to clarify a vital issue of Buddhist teachings relating to the phenomenon of human existence. In Buddhism, the genesis of the concept of **Pañcakkhandha**, like that of the **Paṭiccasamuppāda**, is traceable to the major concern of Buddhism, namely *dukkha* and *nirodha*, i.e. unsatisfactoriness in the life of humans and its logical termination [MN.I.140 & SN.IV. 384]. This **termination of the ills of life** which is referred to in Buddhism as *nirodha* or *nibbāna* [Skt. Nirvāna], we wish to indicate at the very outset, does not, in terms of time space considerations, lie outside the world we live in. Both words *nirodha* and *nibbāna*, in terms of their meaning, imply a total, uncompromising negation of all that is characteristic of the world like birth, decay, disease and death and

hence also of all their derivatives like craving etc. In that sense, *nirodha* or *nibbāna* is transcendental [= *lokuttara*].

But in this transcendence or in the attainment and reaching of this end, one does not get to a different plane or region. Physically there is no movement implied from one area to another. In Indian Upanishadic thinking, terms like ***sa-lokatā, sa-yujyatā, sa-ātmatā*** which describe the state of divine union after death, at different levels, seem to imply a regional difference, i.e. not of the plane of mortals. Nor is Nirvana separated time wise from the living reality of life, with the separator of death lying between *samsāra* and *nibbāna*. Concepts of *jīvan mukta* [released while still living] and *videha mukta* [released on the separation from the physical body] are inseparable aspects of release or *moksa* in the Indian theory of **Brahma-nirvāna** or union with Brahman.

In our opinion, such concepts of release, of physical disengagement are completely alien to early Buddhist thinking. Buddhist release in Nirvana or *āsava-k-khaya* is essentially of a psycho-ethical nature. However, ideas similar to these are seen wending their way into Buddhist thinking [although we do not know for what specific reason] and manifest themselves in new concepts like ***sa-upādisesa*** and ***an-upādisesa*** in relation to Nibbana.

At Itivuttaka p.38 - 44 these two concepts are presented as part of Buddha vacana [*Vuttaṃ h ' etam bhagavatā vuttaṃ arahatā ' ti me suttaṃ. Dve' mā bhikkhave nibbāna-dhātuyo. Katamā dve. Sa-upādisesā ca nibbāna-dhātu anupādisesā ca nibbānadhātu.*]. To the extent that the 'fully enlightened' [*sammadaññā-vimutto*] arahant partakes of 'likes and dislikes' [*manāpā ' manāpaṃ paccanubhotī*], experiences 'pleasure and pain' [*sukha-dukkhaṃ paṭisaṃvediyatī*] through the exercise of his five sense faculties which are still intact, the termination of his *rāga dosa moha* [i.e. his attainment of arahant hood or Nibbāna] is said to be *sa-upādisesā nibbānadhātu*. Of the latter, i.e. *anupādisesa* it is said that in addition to being an arahant of the above type, he rejoices not in his sensory experience [*sabba-vedayitāni anabhinanditāni*].

Therefore they cool off [*sīti-bhavissanti*] or wear out.

Men and women of the world and their offspring are seen in their mortal frames of flesh and blood, striding down the diverse avenues of life. They are born into our midst, no matter from where they come, even as test-tube babies, live and die, having completed more or less than three score years and ten. They receive sensory inputs from the world and assess them and react to them, successfully or otherwise, to the extent of the culture they have put into their sense faculties, physically, morally and intellectually. Note the use of Buddhist concepts like *bhāvita-indriya* [those with developed and cultured sense faculties] and *indriya-samvara = indriyesu guttadvāratā*, i.e. being guarded with regard to the exercise of sense faculties.

Accepting the reality of this phenomenon of life, let us take a closer look at these humans. The totality of their being is brought under the Buddhist concept of Pañcakkhandha or Five Aggregates. We admit that they have physical bodies, gross enough to be perceived by our naked eyes [at least after getting our eyes tested for defects of vision and getting the necessary corrections made]. From the new-born babes up to those of ripe old age, all humans are seen to possess bodies of flesh and blood which are now adequately well known to have had their origin in the fertilized union of a sperm and ovum [zygote]. Buddhist texts insist that we owe this body of ours which basically consists of the four great elements to our parents [*cātummahā-bhūtikā ayaṃ kāyo mātāpettika-sambhavo*]. These bodies grow, decay and perish in reality, quite independent of 'whether we see them' or 'how we see them'. In the concept of Five Aggregates, this physical constituent of life is brought under the very first category of *rūpa* [*rūpakkhandha*], i.e. aggregate of form or matter.

The next four aggregates which follow seem to jointly reflect their leaning on the side of mind or mental activities as opposed to matter. They share of the mental or psychic arena of human life. In their order they are: 2. *vedanā* or cognitive awareness [= perception in its preliminary stage. We concede that

*vedanā* apparently has a more extended meaning in the the listing of the *Paṭiccsamuppāda* where *vedanā*, necessarily impregnated with *saññā*, is mature enough and ready to produce *taṇhā // vedana paccayā taṇhā*], 3. *saññā* or apperception [i.e. more precise sensory identification], 4. *saṅkhāra* or formations: life-activity of the very existence of humans [i.e. both the physical and the *samsāra*-building psychic momentum which in their turn express themselves jointly as each one's personality] and 5. *viññāṇa* or consciousness [both as the agent of the cognitive process of one life-activity and as life-carrier across *samsāra*, referred to as *samvattanika-viññāṇa* or *viññāṇa-sota*. See DN.III.105 and MN.II. 262 ff. respectively].

These five together, i.e. the totality of the *khandhas*, are looked upon as being capable of explaining the total phenomenon of human existence within a single life time, i.e. from birth to death. That is why Bhikkhunī Vajirā, in repudiating Mara's mistaken notion [*ditṭhigataṃ*] of a ' being ' or *satto*, tells him that the conventional usage or *sammuti* of a being is only in relation to the assemblage of the *khandhas* [*evaṃ khandhesu santesu hoti satto ' ti sammuti*. SN. I.135]. These Five Aggregates, from the moment of their genesis, become extra-productive by their concurrent activity with the Five Aggregates of Activation or Grasping [= *upādāna*]. The Living Reality of the Five Aggregates [*Pañcakkhandha*] is, no doubt, the Activating Agency of the *Pañcupādānakkhandha*. [See MN. I.190. Mahāhatthipadopma Sutta for a very down-to-earth explanation of the five categories of *upādāna*. Note and study the following: *Yato kho āvuso ajjhattikañ ceva cakkhuṃ aparibhinnaṃ hoti bāhirā ca rūpā āpāthaṃ āgacchanti tajjo ca samannāhāro hoti. Evaṃ tajjassa viññāṇabhāgassa pātubhāvo hoti. Yaṃ tathābhūtassa rūpaṃ taṃ rūpūpādānakkhandhe samgahaṃ gacchati*.].

We consider the following observations of the Samyutta to be one of the finest studies on the subject. [*Santi kho devānam inda cakkhu-viññeyyā rūpā iṭṭhā kantā manāpā piyarūpā kāmūpasamhitā rajanīya. Tañ ce bhikkhu*

*abhinandati abhivadati ajjhosāya tiṭṭhati. Tassa taṃ abhinandato abhivadato ajjhosāya tiṭṭhato tannissitaṃ viññāṇaṃ hoti tadupādanaṃ. Saupādāno devānaminda bhikkhu no parinibbāyati.* SN.IV.102. For a broader study of these same terms abhinandati abhivadati ajjhosāya tiṭṭhati see Madhupiṇḍika Sutta [MN. I. 109.] Nevertheless, it is to be noted that their activity **is not necessarily and exclusively of one life time**. The fourth and fifth items of saṅkhāra and viññāṇa of the Pañcakkhandha, undeniably imply a great deal more than that. They imply the build up of a life after death and show **the necessary and invariable connection of the present** with both **the past** and **the future**.

Let us now examine a little further these latter four aggregates which are grouped under the category of *nāma*. Here we use the term *nāma* as the first member of the compound word *nāma-rūpa* which is used to designate, or as the equivalent of *satto = puggalo = being*. This equation is more or less the stand taken in the Visuddhimagga [*Iti sabbāni p ' etāni sattavīsati-rūpāni rūpakkhando. Ekāsītiyā lokiyacittehi saddhiṃ uppannā vedanā vedanākkhandho. Taṃ-sampayuttā saññā saññākkhandho. Saṅkhārā saṅkhārakkhandho. Viññāṇaṃ viññāṇakkhandho ' ti. Iti rūpakkhando rūpaṃ cattāro arūpino khandhā nāman ' ti evaṃ eko pañcakkhandhavasena nāma-rūpaṃ vavatthapeti.* Vism. 590].

In support of this identification of the totality of a being in the concept of *nāmarūpa* we would refer to Sn. v. 950 [already quoted above] where the entertaining of **notions of I and mine with regard to oneself** [i.e. the visible physical reality of the humans] are spoken of as shades of egoistic attachment to *nāmarūpa* [i.e. *nāmarūpa = self*]. *Sabbaso nāmarūpasmim yassa natthi mamāyitam* Sn. v. 950 The Commentary on the above clearly explains this egoistic attachment when it says *mamattakaraṇaṃ mama idan ' ti gahitaṃ vā* . [Sn.A. II. 568]. The error of looking upon a selfhood in this manner is further reiterated in the Dhammapada, using *nāma-rūpa* as its basis.

*Taṃ nāma-rūpasmim asajjamānaṃ  
akiñcanaṃ nānupatanti dukkhā.*

Dhp. v. 221

In the verse above, *nāma-rūpasmim asajjamānaṃ* means ' he who sinks not in the mire of *nāma-rūpa* ' [i.e. mistaken notion of selfhood]. What strikes us here as important is the totality of the concept, taken collectively to mean the person or personality, where it is unfortunately grossly overestimated at times to be something with which many other things could be associated [as in *mama idan ' ti gahitaṃ* referred to above]. This is why right estimation of personality is vitally important in Buddhist thinking. But we notice that the Dhammapada Commentary on the above [Dhp.A.III. 298] splits *nāma-rūpa* in this context to its various constituents like *rūpa*, *vedanā* etc. and handles them severally. We think it is both uncalled for and misleading at the same time.

But in contexts like the Paṭiccasamuppāda where *nāmarūpa* as a single unit is used in combination with *viññāṇa* [as in *nāmarūpapaccayā viññāṇam* and *viññāṇapaccayā nāmarūpaṃ* at DN.II. 56], we have to concede that the term *nāmarūpa* necessarily connotes something less than the totality of human personality, for in such contexts it has to be necessarily in combination with *viññāṇa* as its constant companion, mutually dependent on it [...*ettāvatā vaṭṭaṃ vaṭṭati itthattaṃ paññāpanāya yadidaṃ nāmarūpaṃ saha viññāṇena* DN. II. 63 f.]. Therefore we feel that the division of the Five Aggregates of the Pañcakkhandha into two divisions of 1. *rūpa* and 2. *nāma*, submerging as it were the above referred to vitally important factor of *viññāṇa* under *nāma* is extremely misleading.

This would invariably lead to a callous disregard of *viññāṇa* as a *samsāric* factor. In its place probably came the *cuti-citta* and *paṭisandhi-citta* as the important connecting links of the life-chain series. These *cittas* apparently robbed *viññāṇa* [as *saṃvattanika-viññāṇa* and *viññāṇa-sota*] of its vitality and its ethical vibrancy. These *cittas*, with their transparencies of emotional trusting and emotional liking [*saddhā-mattaṃ pema-mattaṃ* . See MN.I.142] as in the case of Maṭṭhakuṇḍali of Dhammapadatthakatha [DhpA. Vol. I. Part I. pp.20 ff.] became

the sole determinants of quality of life after death.

If we accept the **Pañcakkhandha** concept of 'being' as adequately representing both the present life phenomenon of existence here, as well as its continuance hereafter [i.e. *idha* and *pecca*], then we have to give this fifth aggregate of *viññāṇa* [or *viññāṇakkhandha*] additional stature. In some part of itself, it must be the product or outcome of *sañkhāra* which necessarily have to precede it [as in *sañkhāra-paccayā viññāṇam*]. Hence its position in the series as the fifth, following *sañkhāra* as the fourth is totally justified.

But we believe *viññāṇa* in the Five Aggregates series has another important role to play. It has also to be the agent of cognition. This is referred to as ' **the appearance of the relevant segment of consciousness** ' in the Mahahatthipadopama Sutta: *tajjassa viññāṇabhāgassa pātubhāvo*. [MN.I.190 f.] Its production is described as follows: *Yato kho āvuso ajjhattikañ ceva cakkhum aparibhinnaṃ hoti bāhirā ca rūpā āpāthaṃ āgacchanti tajjo ca samannāhāro hoti. Evaṃ tajjassa viññāṇa-bhāgassa pātubhāvo hoti*. Ibid. It means: Functionally one's own eye is not damaged. Material objects of the world outside come within the range of the eye. A resultant link takes place. The **segmented consciousness** or **relevant viññāṇa** [*viññāṇabhāga*] presents itself. It is this cognitive process, with the aid of a segmented *viññāṇa* for each of the sense organs, which leads to the production of each one of the five *upādānakkhandha*.

It is one's attachment to or detachment from them which controls the extent of *dukkha* to which one is subject. These *upādānakkhandha* are no more and no less than the **personalized quantum** of the common property of *pañcakkhandha*. The *pañcakkhandha* or Five Aggregates are, to a greater or lesser degree, the common property of all beings who go through the samsāric life process. They are produced out of the four great physical elements [*cātummahabhūti*], via parental contribution [*mātāpettikasambhavo*] of the sperm and the ovum. We have already referred to their being strung together, at the point of origin of life, together with the **individualized** and **personal samsāric viññāṇa**. Therefore

*viññāṇa* must also necessarily have a place and a function before our reckoning of *saṅkhāra* in the listing of the Five Aggregates to play the role of cognitive agent and to make thereby the Five Aggregates functionally alive.

Now we are left with two more items of the Five Aggregates for further examination. They are nos. 2 and 3 in the series, *vedanā* and *saññā* respectively. We have already sensed a successive sequential order in this Pañcakkhandha listing. The completion of the cognitive process in the human mind, starting with the reception of the stimuli through the sensory organs like the eye etc. is clearly discussed in the Madhupiṇḍika Sutta [MN. I. 111 f] with clarity and precision. Discussing the phenomenon of seeing with the eye, it details out as follows. 'With the eye and an object of vision being brought together, the eye-consciousness is alerted. The three together bring about an impacting [*phassa*].

This brings about the basic and initial cognitive awareness' [*phassa paccayā vedanā*]. It seems no more than a vaguely felt awareness, still lacking in precise identification. Precise identification is *sañjānāti*, the activity of which the Aggregate theory introduces with *saññā*. **Thinking about** comes after identification. **Thinking about produces all the involvement in responsive life activity of the being in the world he lives** [*Cakkhuñ c 'āvuso paṭicca rūpe ca uppajjati cakkhu-viññāṇṇṃ. Tiṇṇaṃ saṅgati phasso. Phassa-paccayā vedanā. Yaṃ vedeti taṃ sañjānāti. Yaṃ sañjānāti taṃ vitakketi. Yaṃ vitakketi taṃ papañceti. Tatonidānaṃ purisaṃ papañcasaññā-saṅkhā samudācaranti atītānāgatapaccuppannesu cakkhu-viññeyyesu rūpesu. loc.cit.*]. We feel the Madhupiṇḍika Sutta makes a precise description of the life activity of the Pañcakkhandha, i.e. of the human individual.

The Five Aggregates together constitute the fathom-sized body or *vyāma-matta-kaḷebara* which in turn is identified as the *loka* or ' **world of each one** ' [*loka* = world]. The Buddhist texts are also careful to refer to this human body as possessing sentiency and consciousness [*saññimhi samanake* SN. I.62.]. **In Buddhism, these are not regarded as the work of an extra or external agency**



**resident within the physical body of man** [like the thumb-sized man resident in one's heart = *ariguṣṭamātrah purusah hṛdaye sannisinnah*]. Therefore most forms of Buddhist spiritual culture invariably instruct the disciple who is pursuing the path with regard to **the correction of attitude to selfhood**. This error of selfhood-vision is concisely summed up under *sakkāya-dīṭṭhi*. The unreality of a self within these [or in any one of these] five aggregates is insisted on and the disciple is required to culture his vision on these lines. Such a bhikkhu commences with the non-fulfillment of gratification [*nibbidā*] with regard to any of these aggregates which collectively constitute the so-called person, variously reckoned as I or another.

SN.III.40 ff. identifies **this kind of purged or purified attitude to life** as **the real religiousness of a monk** who wishes to live in accordance with the teachings of the Buddha: [*Dhammānudhamma-paṭipannassa bhikkhave bhikkhuno ayaṃ anudhammo hoti yaṃ rūpe nibbidā-bahulaṃ vihareyya...vedanāya....viññāṇe nibbidā-bahulaṃ vihareyya.*]. From and through this cautious attitude of detachment [*nibbidā* or non-gratifying] one gains a fuller awareness with regard to the reality of these [*parijānāti* = acquires comprehensive knowledge]. This degree of knowledge is always believed to be coupled with a willingness to let go or relinquish [= *pahāna-saññā*]. It is this quality of knowledge and the consequent relinquishment through it which in Buddhism leads to final liberation [*parijānaṃ parimuccati*].

This is the final and real termination of all ills of worldly existence, namely grief, lamentation, unsatisfactoriness, unhappiness and anxiety [*sokehi paridevehi dukkhehi domanassehi upāyāsehi*], with their physical foundations in birth, decay and death [*jātiyā jarā-maraṇena*]. A thorough grasp of the facts of these and a total and precise living in accordance with the way indicated is held to be the only way out from the turbulence of samsāra to the tranquillity in Nibbana. It is the mishandling of this *pañca-kkhandha* or **the infrastructure of life** which results in the production of the *pañca-upādānakkhandha* or Five

Aggregates of Activation or Grasping. It is this 'grasping process' through *upādāna* which results in the production of samsāric continuance or *bhava* [*upādāna-paccayā bhavo*] and Nibbana is recognized as the outcome of non-grasping or *anupādā paribbānaṃ*.